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Brexit May Force a Rethink for Finland's Eurosceptics

Author(s): Tapio Raunio

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Article text:

*Following the UK's EU referendum, there is a lack of appetite in Finland to hold a similar vote on EU membership or the euro, writes **Tapio Raunio**. He notes that the main proponent of EU referendums, the Finns Party, is currently limited by its role in the coalition government, and that the economic and political fallout for the UK may give Eurosceptics in Finland pause for thought.*

With the result of the Brexit referendum, the reactions of Finnish politicians were quite predictable. Most party leaders expressed disappointment, and emphasised that it is in the interests of both Finland and the EU that the UK should continue to be part of the Single Market.

The only exception was the populist and Eurosceptic the Finns Party, with many inside the party openly delighted with the referendum outcome and suggesting that Finland should also hold a referendum on EU membership. However, the hands of the Finns Party and its leader Timo Soini are tied, as the party is a member of the governing coalition, with the two other cabinet parties – the Centre and the National Coalition – both strongly committed to the EU and [the euro](#).

The current government's [programme](#), while critical of certain aspects of European integration (not least immigration), underlines the importance of the EU for Finland both in terms of security and economic growth, and it does not mention the possibility of a referendum.

Prime Minister Juha Sipilä (Centre) and Petteri Orpo, the new chair of the National Coalition, immediately ruled out holding a similar referendum in Finland. As a result, Soini has essentially simply stated that the referendum outcome should be seen as a vindication of the problematic nature of European integration and that the EU has some serious thinking to do.

Soini has also ruled out any EU referendum before the next parliamentary elections scheduled for spring 2019. There is however considerable pressure within his party for such a referendum. Not only has the party been consistently against the EU since the 1990s – although without actually calling for Finland's withdrawal from the EU or the Eurozone – it has also called for more active use of direct democracy in key EU decisions.

In its 2014 European Parliament election [manifesto](#), the party stated that it 'believes there should be a referendum on Finland's EU membership in a similar way to what the UK government has proposed – first negotiations on the basic EU

constitution and membership conditions and then referendums held on whether to be a member of the reformed EU or not.'

According to a [survey](#) carried out by Yle, the Finnish Broadcasting Company, over half of the party's MPs support a referendum on EU membership. Sebastian Tynkkynen, the controversial head of the party's youth organisation, has put forward a motion for a citizens' initiative on an EU membership referendum.

Even if Tynkkynen's initiative musters the threshold of 50000 signatures, there is very low support in the Finnish Parliament, the Eduskunta, for such a referendum. Soini has indicated that his party will come back to the referendum issue when it starts planning the campaign for the 2019 Eduskunta elections.

Support for the Finns Party has halved since the election in April 2015. Unless the party recovers on its own, campaigning for a referendum might seem like an attractive option. But none of the other parties is in favour of a referendum, and it is unlikely that their positions will change. The only exception might be the Christian Democrats, but they currently have only five MPs.

The public seems more divided over the issue. In one poll carried out after the UK's referendum, 54 per cent were against having a similar referendum in Finland, 23 per cent were in favour of a referendum following new membership terms, and 16 per cent supported a referendum as soon as possible.

Interestingly, much of the debate, both among the politicians and in the media, has focused on the referendum instrument itself. Most commentators have pointed out how the 'Leave' side in the UK first engaged in a rather dishonest campaign and then appeared clueless about what to do after the result was clear.

Perhaps a lesson to be drawn from the British referendum is that it can be easy to oppose EU membership, but any notions of 'independence' or 'national sovereignty' sound increasingly illusory in a world characterised by strong economic and political interdependence. The Finnish economy is dependent on trade with EU countries, and thus – just as in the UK – a key concern would be access to the Single Market.

Until now, the Finns Party and other critics of European integration have essentially campaigned against 'unelected Brussels technocrats' without articulating a coherent vision of how Finland could survive outside the EU. Maybe the Brexit referendum will force them to think more seriously about the challenges Finland would face outside of the EU or the euro area.

Author information:

Tapio Raunio

The University of Tampere

Prof Tapio Raunio is Professor of Political Science at the University of Tampere. His research interests include European representative democracy, the role of national parties and parliaments in European integration and Finnish politics.

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